

Book Review: The Tolls of Uncertainty: How Privilege and the Guilt Gap Shape Unemployment in America by Sarah Damaske

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Damaske, Sarah. *The Tolls of Uncertainty: How Privilege and the Guilt Gap Shape Unemployment in America*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. Xi + 318 pages. Hardcover, \$27.95.

In *The Tolls of Uncertainty*, sociologist Sarah Damaske paints an illuminating portrait of modern-day unemployment and highlights the plight of the contemporary American worker. The text relies on research conducted utilizing a qualitative interviewing method to explore the life courses of 100 unemployed middle and working-class men and women between 2013 and 2015, at the early stages of and through the first year of their unemployment experience. Damaske weaves individual's stories into the text including a white middle-class man who is able to take advantage of his time on unemployment to take a break from work and to use the funds he contributed to the unemployment system for support, to the white working-class woman who was already living below the poverty line while working full-time so that when her job was lost her limited unemployment benefits led her to have to decide between feeding herself or her children.

Damaske details the distinctions in the unemployed based on class and gender, highlighting issues such as differences in benefits and opportunities, the gender pay gap, and the second shift. Damaske explains how the institutional structures of unemployment in the United States are designed such that those in a position of privilege such as educated middle-class men, can receive greater benefits, and can more easily maneuver unemployment such as by taking advantage of networks and by receiving larger unemployment benefits than a working-class person, even though both may have paid the same into the unemployment system.

The text explores the question of how the conditions of unemployment serve to reproduce inequities that already exist in both class and gender where those who had better employment and more resources before job loss were better able to weather the unemployment experience. Thus, the unemployment experience differs between men and women and between middle and

working-class persons. Damaske incorporates societal norms such as mothering and self-sacrifice into the examination and explains topics such as the guilt gap where she found that women often feel more guilt in their job loss, end up taking on more of the household tasks and are more likely to give up their own health care. Issues such as marital status, whether a spouse was employed, education, number of children, and whether a severance package was offered impacted the unemployment experience.

Many on unemployment were unsure of the rules, specific benefits or how to access resources and the information that was made available to them was often confusing. Damaske found that it was individuals with greater economic security pre-job loss that had a better understanding of the unemployment rules and were more likely to break those rules, not the poor that society often characterizes as abusing the system. Damaske explains that research often focuses on the economic impacts of unemployment without enough focus on the social or psychological impacts. She categorizes the paths people took in their job loss (lockstep, transitory and chronic unemployment) and unemployment search (deliberate, take time, urgent, diverted) such that patterns could be recognized amongst the participants.

Damaske concludes the text by providing a set of policy recommendations that focus on making changes to the unemployment insurance system and the state of employment in the United States. This is especially poignant today because while Damaske notes some of the impact of COVID on employment in the United States, her study was conducted prior to this period. Yet COVID has brought to light for many workers the problems of employment including low wages and a minimum wage that is significantly below the necessary living wage for citizens in the United States, lack of affordable health care even with the existence of the Affordable Care Act and the poor state of the childcare industry. Workers are becoming more

aware of the needs that Damaske points out in her work for people to take positions that use their skills and pay them enough to afford to care for their children, maintain their health and take pride in what they do.

Potential critiques of the research are pointed out by Damaske herself like the limited range of racial and ethnic diversity among participants as well as not including large urban centers as areas of study. She details her sampling and analysis process and discusses concerns such as interviewer bias. *The Tolls of Uncertainty* is well suited for both the everyday reader and for use in a variety of college disciplines including sociology, political science, public policy, and economics. While some readers may take issue with the qualitative nature of the study, even while supported throughout by reports and statistics, it should be noted that this research gives a voice to many in the United States who have experienced unemployment. In sum, Damaske accomplished what she set out to do which is to show that “unemployment widens already existing inequalities between people and creates new inequalities” (p. 171).

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